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ABSTRACT

At Valdosta State University (Georgia), a philosophy course, "A Virtual Classroom: The Electronic Agora," was developed and conducted entirely through computer media. Twenty-one students were in the class. The two main activities, addressing the central objectives of a philosophy course, were: (1) research, and (2) class discussion and critical dialogue. Through the university's gopher service, a virtual library with over 100 philosophical texts was created. Course handouts were posted here as well, with all resources being fully searchable electronically. All classroom discussion and dialogue was to be conducted through e-mail via an electronic list subscribed to by class members. Members would respond to the discussion topic, defend their positions, raise critical objections, respond to challenges, reflect on implied new directions for analysis and further critical thought. The development of interpersonal relationships based only upon the criticism and expansion of ideas, and the placement of class work and discussion into a course archive were identified as key elements of the virtual philosophy classroom. (MAS)

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Reflections on Electronic Frontiers in Education

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As a concerned educator, I constantly seek ways of improving my teaching and learning effectiveness in the courses for which I am responsible. In this respect I am an experimenter. Educational experiments, however, must be undertaken with sensitivity and care, and implemented with a clear and thoughtful direction in mind; otherwise, professional integrity, and one's ethical responsibility to students, could be compromised. So the inevitable question becomes "Just how much deviation from traditional educational techniques and methods is warranted?"

With this question in mind, I contemplated offering a Special Topics in Philosophy course during summer quarter, 1994, to be conducted totally through the computer electronic medium. Utilizing the information highway of the international Internet, how would a class, whose members know one another only through their thoughts written down and exchanged, differ from the standard context, where bodily presence is an integral part of communication and class discussion? No body language for cues, no pre-disposed attitudes based on race, gender, age, etc.---just each other's ideas to go on, as crafted in text and exchanged for debate and critical discussion, including my own?

How would library research projects fare in this medium, where on-line resources available through an electronic source would constitute the only research infrastructure, instead of physical trips to the Library? Where individual critiques would be prepared, and essays shared, between authors whose personal identities and attributes are shaped mainly for others by what one writes and expresses? Where 'you are what you write'? How indeed would cyber classmates develop their relationships with one another and with me? How would I fare in this virtual educational community, where disembodied ideas reign?

After discussion with colleagues and students, I decided to develop and conduct such a course. Titled 'A Virtual Classroom: the Electronic Agora', the course was accessible on-line twenty- four hours a day, seven days a week, for the eight-week quarter. Twenty-one members made up the class, with eight taking the course for university credit. Most participants were university students, with one in Texas, another in New York, one in Illinois, and yet another in North Carolina, in addition to the remaining 'on campus' Georgia members ('on campus'...hmm). Several Valdosta State faculty were active members as well.

Two main activities, addressing the central objectives of a philosophy course are: research, and class

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discussion and critical dialogue. Through Valdosta State University's Philosophy Internet Gopher service, a Virtual Library was created, with over one hundred philosophical texts available. Course handouts were posted here as well, with all resources being fully searchable electronically. Additionally, this electronic-text resource is now featured as the international Philosophy Subject Tree by the American Philosophical Association, and is available for scholars world-wide. Physical limitations for geographically-removed library visitors suddenly vanished, substituted instead by cyberspace accessiblity that would transcend these spatial/temporal inconveniences. And no cost for classroom materials, at least in the traditional sense.

All classroom discussion and dialogue was to be conducted through e-mail, via PHICYBER (Philosophers in Cyberspace), an electronic list subscribed to by the class members. The list continues to serve as a forum and electronic marketplace (hence Agora) for classroom exchanges. It was remarkable to watch interpersonal relationships unfold, based only, as agreed, upon one another's ideas criticized and expanded. Members would respond to the discussion topic, defend their positions, raise critical objections, respond to challenges, reflect on implied new directions for analysis and further critical thought. As one student put it, "It is so different when you have to think through your ideas, put them in writing, and be prepared to back up your views, knowing that once expressed they are out there for the permanent record!" This student alludes to the fact that all classroom work and discussions were placed in a course archive, and available for ongoing retrieval and review. Indeed, all course materials and assignments, as well as all log-on activity, were part of the record. Think of the course as a transcript. There were no voices or accents, no noises, no smells, no people- --only ideas, and ideas on ideas, formulated, written and re- written, expressed and re-visited.

During the final two days of the quarter, those who could physically arrange it met together for the first time in flesh to discuss their experiences, and watched, listened and talked to each other, in part to re-identify in human form those whose personal identities had been formulated by means of thoughts alone! It was plain that far from the virtual reality of a classroom, this Electronic Agora was the real Marketplace of Ideas, where thoughts seemed to take on a life of their own, and we thinkers were but vehicles for their transmission and replication. And now, face to face, we had the business of physical metamorphasis to straighten out.

The experiment was too good to let go, and after a piece descibing it came out in the Chronicle of Higher Education, I received numerous inquiries, which helped shape plans for PHICYBER II, the summer, 1995, version. Global in scope, the new Electronic Agora will involve participants from some nine countries, and will explore in the cyberspace medium multicultural themes in this multicultural Marketplace. The dynamics should prove to be fascinating to explore, especially in light of computer-mediated world-wide communucation and collaboration. A World Wibe Web site will provide additional benefits over last summer, in particular the multimedia aspects. Whether one climbs aboard as a full-credit student or as a cyberauditor, the electronic voyage is meant to be quite an odyssey. As an aside, it might be mentioned that there are current deliberations related to what cyber-tuition might be for future cyberversity attendees!

To wrap up: I am convinced that the electronic medium can provide unlimited opportunities for those whose personal situation marries well with the occasion, as long as responsible, mature participants are those who seize the opportunities. Example: disabled students whose creative ideas and abilities can be enhanced without the encumbrances of unfortunate spatial/temporal logistical problems, or those whose physical arrangements might otherwise preclude engagement in university scholarship and dialogue. I am equally convinced that the Virtual Classroom model should be a supplement to existing university life. I am old fashioned and wise enough to realize that face-to-face interactions are indispensable educationally. After all, these occasions are those that shape real-world involvement, even if such involvement is becoming more and more computer-mediated.

Responsible choices and alternatives in the new electronic frontier should be made only upon thoughtful, reflective balance; given that, electronic education experiments can bring out the best of what diversity in quality education has to offer. Such are some exciting resources for learning on the Information Superhighway.